United Nations E/2006/21

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
11 April 2006

Original: English

Substantive session of 2006
3-28 July 2006
Item 1 of the provisional agenda*
Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters

Application of an intergovernmental organization for observer status with the Economic and Social Council

Letter dated 7 March 2006 from the Secretary-General of the Ramsar Convention secretariat, the representative of Uganda and Chairman of the Standing Committee and the representative of the Bahamas and Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee addressed to the President of the Economic and Social Council

The Convention on Wetlands was adopted in Ramsar, Islamic Republic of Iran, on 2 February 1971. Although it is not a United Nations treaty, its depositary is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its United Nations registration number as a multilateral agreement is No. 14583. The Convention entered into force in 1975 and as of February 2006 has 150 contracting parties, or member States.

The Convention's implementation is the responsibility only of its Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP), and its day-to-day administration has been entrusted to a secretariat under the authority of its Standing Committee, elected by the Contracting Parties. The Ramsar secretariat is hosted by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in Gland, Switzerland.

The Ramsar Convention is the first of the modern global intergovernmental treaties on the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, but, compared with more recent ones, its provisions are relatively straightforward and general. The mission of the Ramsar Convention, as adopted by the parties in 1999 and refined in 2002, is "the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world".

* E/2006/100.

06-30803 (E) 130406

The official name of the treaty, the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, reflects the original emphasis upon the conservation and wise use of wetlands primarily as habitat for waterbirds. Over the years, however, the Convention has broadened its scope to cover all aspects of wetland conservation and wise use, recognizing wetlands as ecosystems that are extremely important for biodiversity conservation and for the well-being of human communities.

The Ramsar Convention secretariat carries out the day-to-day coordination of the Convention's activities. The secretariat is headed by a Secretary-General who answers to the Standing Committee and who supervises the work of a small number of policy/technical, communications and administrative staff.

The functions of the secretariat are to:

(a) Provide administrative, scientific and technical support to the contracting parties, especially in relation to the implementation of the Ramsar strategic plan;

(b) Assist in recruiting new contracting parties;

(c) Assist in convening and organizing the meetings of the Conference of the Parties, the meetings of the Standing Committee and of the scientific subsidiary body (the Scientific and Technical Review Panel), and Ramsar regional meetings;

(d) Make known the decisions, resolutions and recommendations of the Conference of the Parties and of the Standing Committee;

(e) Provide secretariat functions for the Scientific and Technical Review Panel;

(f) Secure financial contributions for the Small Grants Fund, circulate an annual call for applications and evaluate the project proposals received from Contracting Parties and proposals received for the "Wetlands for the Future" assistance programme;

(g) Administer projects funded with earmarked contributions;

(h) Keep the contracting parties and the Ramsar community in general informed of developments related to the Convention;

(i) Maintain the List of Wetlands of International Importance and note any additions and changes to the List and the Ramsar sites database (day-to-day development of the database is subcontracted to Wetlands International);

(j) Organize Ramsar Advisory Missions at the request of the contracting parties and contribute to follow-up of their reports;

(k) Develop avenues of cooperation with other conventions, intergovernmental institutions and national and international non-governmental organizations.

For many years the parties to the Convention assumed that the Ramsar secretariat was an intergovernmental organization and therefore no steps were taken to give a proper status to the secretariat. This has in effect left the secretariat in a kind of legal limbo, which has frequently been the occasion of operational problems in terms of contractual arrangements with public and private funding sources.

internal financial management, visas for official travel, customs status and recognition in international forums.

During the most recent meeting of the Conference of the Parties, which was held in Uganda in November 2006, the parties adopted resolution IX.10, "Use of the term and status of the Ramsar Secretariat" ** By that resolution, the member States requested the secretariat and the Standing Committee to engage in a consultative process to find out what is required for the transformation of the status of the Ramsar secretariat into that of an international organization.

Our secretariat actively participates in many of the United Nations processes and for many years has been contributing to the report of the Secretary-General on issues related to marine resources, the marine environment, freshwater issues and sustainable development. The Ramsar secretariat is also an active member of the Environmental Management Group, which meets periodically in Geneva under the coordination of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Biodiversity Liaison Group, which includes all the United Nations biodiversity-related conventions with Ramsar, and attends meeting of United Nations-Water.

In order to assist with the implementation of at least one aspect of the resolution of the contracting parties, it would be appreciated if you could bring our request to be recognized as an international organization to the attention of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council in 2006. We are ready to provide any additional information you feel may be necessary or helpful to reach this decision.

(*Signed*) Peter **Bridgewater**
Secretary-General

(*Signed*) Paul **Mafabi**
African representative, Government of Uganda
Chair of the Standing Committee

(*Signed*) John **Bowleg**
Caribbean representative, Government of the Bahamas
Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee

** The documents referred to have been deposited with the secretariat of the Economic and Social Council and can be examined by member States upon request.